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SPECIAL REPORT

4-Minute Nightmare

False Signal Hints Attack, Sends U. S. Bombers to Runways

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At the height of the Berlin crisis late last fall, signals at Strategic Air Command headquarters indicated the United States might be under attack and hydrogen-bomb-loaded planes even rushed to the runways of SAC bases all over the world.

The bombers did not take off. It was a false alarm.

The four harrowing minutes that the alert lasted revealed a flaw in SAC and Air Defense Command communications. But it also showed that the safety devices that control our retalitory forces do work, and it proved for the first time that SAC actually has half its bombers on effective 12½-minute alert.

Lights Hint Trouble

This is the story, never before told:

It was 5 a.m., cold and dark at Omaha, Neb. Underground, near the sleeping city, SAC officers were alert, as always, before the huge display boards that would be used to plot the course of a global war.

Suddenly, lights on a signal board indicated that something had gone wrong with BMEWS, the two giant radar stations designed to detect enemy missiles high across the Arctic wastes.

SAC officers understood instantly that the signal could mean that the stations had been destroyed by the enemy. They knew it would be logical for the enemy to destroy BMEWS as the first overt move in a massive attack on the United States.

Gen. Power Notified

If it was the start of an attack, the Strategic Air Command had only minutes to act. Enemy ICBMs could land on the United States within 15 minutes of the time they crossed the Arctic.

The officers swiftly informed the boss of SAC, Gen. Thomas S. Power, and also started a check with Air Defense Command headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colo.

But the lines to Colorado Springs were found to be dead.

There could be two explanations for the dead lines and the signals on the display board. Either an attack was under way, or there was a foulup with the equipment.

Both explanations seemed unlikely. The Berlin crisis was at its peak, but there were no intelligence reports of Russian preparations for a strike. Intelligence did say, moreover, that if

GEN. POWER
—AP Wirephoto

the Russians attacked at that time, they would have only enough missiles and bombers to wound the United States and insure their own destruction.

At the same time, duplicated—even quintupled—electronic circuits made it impossible, in theory, for communications to be cut simultaneously with BMEWS and ADC headquarters.

But Gen. Power could not wait for an explanation. He picked up the red telephone that connects him with every SAC base in the world and ordered all bombers on alert to taxi to the runways and be ready to take off.

Jet engines started to whine, and crews ran pell-mell for their planes. Hydrogen bombs were already on board; each crew had its list of targets.

Back underground at Omaha, SAC officers were going through their own preparations for war and also looking for a possible defect in their communications equipment.

Classified Information

What was happening in Washington at this time is "classified," according to a Defense Department spokesman. Normally during such an alarm, the President, Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff would be notified so that they could—if they felt it necessary—go to a pro-

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tected command post and take over active direction.

For slightly more than four minutes war seemed possible. Then, just as suddenly as they were broken, communications between SAC, BMEWS and the Air Defense Command were resumed.

It was quickly clear that BMEWS was unharmed after all, and no one had hit Colorado Springs. There was to be no war.

The tension broke at SAC headquarters, but to be completely on the safe side, they let the bombers continue to move to the runways. Just 12½ minutes after Gen. Power sent out his first order, the word was given that one-half of SAC's bombers—the full alert force—were waiting to take off.

Back On Routine Alert

If the original order had been to "scramble," almost all of those planes could have been in the air and on their way already to enemy targets.

They did not take off; Gen. Power ordered them back to routine alert status.

This story was kept secret by SAC and the Pentagon until yesterday for two reasons:

First, the Pentagon feared that if the public heard about the alarm, people would think mistakenly that this country had gone to the brink of war over an error.

Second, SAC wanted to find the cause of the communications break and correct it before the enemy could find any possible advantage in the incident.

Mistake in Design

Today the malfunction has been found and corrected. Apparently it was a design mistake. The multiple lines that were supposed to provide backup if one or more of them failed all ran together at one point, and the trouble occurred there.

They no longer run together at any point.

The exact cause of the trouble will not be made public. No matter whether the cause of the disruption was man made or natural, there may be some way that the enemy could benefit from knowing the details.

The possibility of public misunderstanding still exists, in the opinion of Pentagon officials. That is why they want to emphasize that there was no danger of accidental war. strated that the Strategic Air Command has safeguards to spare.

Many Double Checks

First of all, no one simply pushed a button and started a war. Gen. Power used his professional judgment and ordered his forces into a position to fight—he did not send them off to fight.

Even if he had, the bombers would have turned around and returned to their bases unless they had been sent a further order to proceed.

Meanwhile SAC and the top civilian and military leaders would have had at least two hours to check out the alarm before a final "go" signal would have been sent.

During that time, other signs of an attack would have been checked and the President would have made a decision to proceed or drop back.

Any one of these multiple layers of checks would have stopped an attack which did not, in fact, start.

Safeguards like these have been used before. In one well-publicized incident more than a year ago the BMEWS radar picked up the moon and sent a false signal that one ICBM was on its way. SAC responded quickly, but again stopped well short of an accidental war.

Beat Its Goal

SAC is proud of its actions during the alarm. But it is most proud and relieved to have found out during the alarm that it does have an ability to keep half of its bomber force on under-15-minute alert.

Under the Eisenhower administration, SAC was building toward a 15-minute alert of one-third of its force. Before it could achieve that, President Kennedy ordered the alert stepped up to one-half of the force.

Some SAC officers thought it couldn't be done. Both men and machines have their limitations, and the goal of one-half of the crews and planes ready to take off in 15 minutes seemed to stretch resources unreasonably.

On that late fall night when the alarm sounded, SAC was not at all sure it really had such an alert force. But during that completely unscheduled pre-dawn test, SAC found it could beat the goal by 2½ minutes.